

I. Introduction

Although hunger occurs as an individual phenomenon, its impact affects and diminishes the lives of everyone in the community. The costs we all pay are substantial. Many are hidden costs, from higher health care costs, to higher taxes to provide emergency services, social programs and services, law and order, extra education programs for children with special needs, to list a few. There are quality of life costs and, sadly, spiritual costs, all consuming our human and financial resources while denying us individually and collectively our full potential. We cannot afford to let hunger persist.

The Maine Millennium Commission on Hunger & Food Security has completed two years of work to develop a plan to end hunger in the State of Maine. The Commission believes that Maine has a choice – to continue as we are, doing little to end hunger while the cost of programs and services to alleviate the symptoms of hunger continue to rise, or to take a new approach.

Maine should set high targets. In our interim report the Commission identified three areas for action. After another year of deliberation and study we still believe these three areas hold the many of the keys to ending hunger:

1. Ensure the economic security and well being of all citizens through:
 - a. A livable wage;
 - b. A more equitable tax system that reduces the burden on lower and moderate income wage earners;
 - c. The services necessary to households to have access to work and to food, including quality affordable child care, reliable transportation, and adequate affordable health care; and
 - d. An improved economy and strategic assistance to small businesses to make the benefits available to larger firms easier for them to access, and to enable them to offer the same services and benefits to their workers that are provided by larger firms.
2. Increase access to and consumption of locally produced food from Maine farms through a comprehensive food policy and structural changes in the food system that will:
 - a. Remove barriers that limit access to locally produced foods,
 - b. Improve nutrition information and its dissemination, and
 - c. Provide incentives to lower income households to purchase food locally and thereby change consumer buying patterns.
3. Ensure that resources are available to respond to new needs created by changing lifestyles, culture and values, and aging of the population, such as:
 - a. Moving to a universal school nutrition program,

- b. Expanding the school breakfast program to more Maine schools, and
- c. Increasing the amount of funds available for school meals programs.

Work was begun in the first session of the 120th legislature to address these concerns. It must continue. In this final report the Commission further defines its prescription, or blueprint, for their achievement. In addition, the Commission also offers several further strategies and actions that we believe are critical to ending hunger for the long term:

Maine should make hunger a central factor for consideration in public policy and practice. Maine should recognize that hunger is not only a consequence of other shortcomings, but also a cause of many of the problems faced by Maine and its citizens. Maine must consider the role of hunger in formulating the State's education policies, its economic development policies, health care policies, agriculture policies, rural and urban policies, and others. It is well established in research that children don't learn well when they are hungry, that workers don't perform as well when poorly fed, or that many of the costs of health care could be avoided with adequate nutrition.

Maine needs to start now to prepare for a growing elderly population that will overwhelm systems already stretched to their limits. Maine's population is changing. Most notably it is aging. Over the past couple decades, public policies have shifted toward keeping more elderly, even feeble elderly, in their homes. The problems associated with high cost of health care and prescription drugs, transportation and access to services that are essential to independence and self-reliance as well as to social interaction for a growing elder population will increase in geometric proportion over the next few decades. Maine will need to make a much greater investment to ensure a growing population of elderly are not at nutritional risk. Transportation alternatives are especially critical because mobility and self-reliance are keys to good health as well as access to food.

The Commission has also found that the dignity of Maine citizens has all too often been compromised by the current systems used to deliver services. Maine should move toward systems that ensure the anonymity and privacy of those who must rely on services and programs. These should include universal school nutrition, expanded use of EBT (electronic benefits transfer) cards and other means.

Maine should ensure a seamless system of services for those who are unable on their own to obtain adequate nutrition or adequate income to ensure access to safe and nutritious food. We must ensure that those with the least income and resources are provided for adequately and with dignity.

Finally, Maine must create an Office of Food Security to coordinate these efforts into the future, monitor progress to end hunger, ensure the increased consumption of Maine grown food, and continue the work begun by this commission to create a world where hunger does not exist.

II. Ending Hunger - Can we afford not to?

People at all socioeconomic levels are at risk of poor nutrition. Some do not eat an adequate diet each day because of lack of money to buy sufficient food. Others make poor food choices, either because of lack of time to prepare a balanced meal or lack of good knowledge of nutrition, or because their limited income forces them to choose lower cost foods that often fill but not nurture. Still others find their diets limited or their food dollars not well spent because of mobility factors associated with age, disability, lack of transportation, and even lack of knowledge about where to find good and affordable sources of healthy food. Lack of time for meals has become increasingly a factor in homes where both parents are working and where more children are left to fend for themselves at mealtime or for snacks. In school an increasing number of activities compete with lunch schedules causing children to buy a candy bar or soda from a canteen or skip food altogether.

Yet, the latest information on hunger shows clearly that hunger creates great financial costs, human costs, and social costs that we can ill afford.

Consider:



In 2000, 4th grade reading scores were much lower among children eligible for free and reduced price school lunch.

A US Department of Education study of the reading scores of 4th grade students in 2000 found that only 14% of children eligible for free and reduced price meals performed at the "proficient" level while 41% of non-eligible children were reading at the proficient level (reading levels are divided into basic, proficient and advanced). Sixty percent of eligible children were reading below the basic level compared to only 26% of those not eligible for subsidized school meals. While these statistics indicate the poorer performance of children from lower income families, there is plenty of evidence to link poverty and inadequate nutrition.



Improved diets could reduce coronary heart disease and stroke mortality by at least 20% and cancer and diabetes mortality by at least 30%.

Over \$33 billion in medical costs associated with these diseases each year may be attributed to diet. Lost productivity resulting from disability caused by these four diet-related illnesses alone costs American workers \$9.3 billion each year. This rises to \$28 billion per year when diet-related premature deaths are considered. When other diet-related disabilities are

added (osteoporosis, obesity, hypertension, etc.) the costs is far greater. The cost of diet-related osteoporosis hip fractures is \$5.1 - \$10.6 billion each year.

(Source: USDA, High Costs of Poor Eating Patterns in the United States)



A USDA 1994-96 Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals found that only 12% of Americans had diets that could be classified as "good" according to the USDA Healthy Eating Index.

Less than 20% of those surveyed consumed the recommended number of fruits and less than a third consumed the recommended servings on grains, vegetables, milk and meat groups, while consumption of saturated fat and cholesterol exceeded standards.



An evaluation of the WIC program found that young children whose mothers participated in WIC when pregnant and lactating scored significantly higher on vocabulary tests than mothers who did not receive WIC benefits.

The assessment also found substantial reduction in iron deficiency among young children. Iron deficiency is one of the most prevalent nutritional problems of children in the US, and a deficiency in infancy is known to cause a permanent loss of IQ later in life. Anemia also leads to shortened attention span, irritability, fatigue, and difficulty with concentration, all evidenced in the poor performance of anemic children on vocabulary, reading and other tests.



Children who are hungry are more likely to have behavioral and academic problems than children who get enough to eat. At school, hungry children have more problems with irritability, anxiety, and aggression, as well as higher absenteeism and tardiness (Pediatrics, January, 1998; *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, February, 1998).

Studies by the state of Minnesota, and the Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital found improved math grades, reduced hyperactivity, decreased absence and tardy rates, and improved behavior among students who regularly ate breakfast. According to Tuft's University, low-income children who participated in the USDA's School Breakfast Program were shown to have significantly higher standardized test scores than non-participants.



School lunch programs have been found to play a substantial role in the diets of school age children.

Research conducted by the USDA's Office of Analysis, Nutrition, & Evaluation has shown that children participating in school lunch programs:

1. Have higher mean intakes of Vitamins B6, B12, Vitamin C thiamin, riboflavin, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium and zinc;
2. Have substantially lower intakes of added sugars – 13.2% for participating children compared to 22.9% for non-participants, and
3. Are more likely to consume vegetables, dairy and protein.
4. States that have instituted universal meals programs have demonstrated the cost effectiveness of such programs.



Most recently, the Surgeon General issued warnings this past December about the rising obesity rate in the US and the health consequences. At least 300,000 Americans die each year from illnesses caused by or worsened by obesity, second only to the 400,000 deaths linked to smoking. Today 60% of adults and 13% of children are overweight or obese and the number is rising with each decade. The report groups states according to the extent of obesity. In 2000, Maine was in the second highest category, with 15-19% of the population considered obese.

The report linked obesity to multiple causes and issued challenges to individuals and families, schools, communities, industry and government:

1. The food industry, and especially restaurants and fast food take-outs, has marketed “super sized” junk foods and food products with little nutritive value to the public which has increased the amount of empty calories consumed, primarily at the expense of fresh produce. The food industry is challenged to promote more reasonable portions and more healthful foods.
2. Communities and schools and worksites are encouraged to provide more safe places for all Americans to become more active and to exercise.
3. Schools are challenged to provide for more healthful food in the schools, better enforce federal rules restricting student’s access to junk food in vending machines, and reduce the amount of fat and increase in vitamin levels in school lunches.
4. Government is encouraged to fund projects to increase access to affordable fruits and vegetables.

The report further acknowledges the link between diet and hunger due to lack of income, noting that the poor tend to be the fattest because often the most fattening foods are the cheapest.



America's Second Harvest (A2H) is an organization that serves an estimated 23.3 million different people annually and is the nation's largest organization of emergency food providers. A study conducted in 2001 for the organization and based on completed in-person interviews with more than 32,000 clients served by the A2H network, as well as completed questionnaires from nearly 24,000 A2H agencies found that between 56% and 60% of the agencies surveyed reported that there had been an increase since 1998 in the number of clients who come to their emergency food program sites. (www.hungerinamerica.org) Testimony received by the Commission revealed the same trends in Maine.



How much hunger exists in Maine? Hunger in Maine is all too real and all too frequent a condition. It is largely an invisible problem because pride keeps many from seeking help and many more fall between the cracks of services that are intended to provide relief.

The USDA annual measure of food security shows Maine to have the highest percentage of food insecure households in New England and one of the highest levels in the northeastern US.

ONE in TEN: people in Maine are hungry or at risk of being hungry according to the assessment of food security conducted annually by the USDA.

FOUR IN TEN of Maine children under 12 years of age are hungry or at risk of hunger. A national study of childhood hunger (CCHIP, the Community Childhood Hunger Identification Project) found 20,000 children in Maine under age 12 living in homes where hunger is a constant concern and another 64,000 children under age 12 at risk of hunger.

EIGHT IN TEN households in the CHIPP survey reported that adults routinely sacrificed for their children by eating less, skipping meals entirely, or by eating less nutritious food. The CHIPP report revealed that adults are even more likely than children to experience hunger in low income homes.

ONE IN THREE jobs in Maine do not pay enough to cover the basic needs of a family. Many others are seasonal, less than full time, or offer only partial benefits. In spite of relatively good economic times, poverty has remained a persistent condition for many Maine households.

More than 100,000 MAINE CITIZENS receive food stamp benefits each month, in spite of program cutbacks and efforts to reduce dependence on public aid programs.

These statistics are only part of the picture. The number of people homeless each night, the hundreds that show up at soup kitchens each day, the thousands that go to a food pantry weekly or monthly, the thousands of meals served to elderly at congregate sites or delivered to the elderly, sick or disabled by meals on wheels programs - all attest to the extent of hunger and risk of hunger in Maine and to the depth of suffering that would exist were it not for the generosity and dedication of many. Even more devastating is the plight of those who go without in silence - elderly who refuse help because of pride, or children who go through the school day hungry rather than accept a free lunch and reveal their economic situation to classmates, or breadwinners who feel they have failed their families because they cannot earn enough to provide adequately.

III. A new Approach is Needed.

For many years society has wrestled with how to tackle the root causes of hunger. In part, the limited progress is due to a lack of a clear understanding of how hunger affects and costs us all. The approaches commonly engaged to address hunger reflect this lack of understanding include:

Social Responsibility Model: At the most basic level, simply feeding people has come to be a strategy to address hunger in the community and as such an extensive network of programs and services to alleviate its effects has been developed.

Behavior Adjustment Model: Categorize hunger as a problem associated with poverty and focus on the poor and try to change their behavior.

Transfer Responsibility: Blame the economy or the “system” or blame the poor.

Public policy has typically responded to hunger with fragmented approaches and, while each may be valid individually, and essential, these approaches have not acknowledged the complexity of the conditions leading to hunger nor the role hunger plays in perpetuating them.

In reality, hunger is both a symptom that results from other conditions and at the same time it is a cause of those same conditions. It is, in the truest sense, a "vicious circle" and as such, requires a strategic approach that considers all of the aspects of hunger.

Hunger as a consequence:

Hunger is a symptom of larger problems affecting individuals and families, such as lack of adequate income, lack of good knowledge of foods and their nutritional values. The technology of food production, processing, packaging, marketing, and distribution has changed how and what we eat and replaced efficient local food systems that link producers and consumers. Lack of time, increasing demands and changing life styles make it difficult if not impossible to eat healthy. Public attitudes that create stigma keep a child from accepting a meal in school or a senior from accepting food stamps.

As such, ending hunger requires addressing those conditions in society that contribute to hunger. This means:



. Ensuring all households have the income they need to purchase healthful food through normal means, including a livable wage for all workers and a decent standard of living to those who for whatever reason cannot work.



. Ensuring a level playing field for small businesses in Maine so they can provide more opportunities, better wages, and greater benefits to their workers.



. Ensuring the tax structure is fair to workers and small businesses.



. Developing a food policy and food system that increases access for Maine citizens to locally produced food.



. Removing the barriers to work, to shopping locally, and to meeting other daily needs by improving public transit systems, increasing access to affordable quality child care and to affordable housing, and providing access to financial options to enable lower income household to get a car loan.

Hunger as a cause:

Hunger is also a key causal factor for many of the larger problems in society such as the burgeoning costs of health care, lost productivity, loss of farms and farmland and an ailing rural economy, and poor educational achievement. These conditions, in turn, perpetuate hunger by reducing the availability of local food, reducing the potential of earning an adequate income to purchase sufficient food, and by increasing other costs, such as the cost of health care, that further erode the amount of income in the household available for food and the amount of public dollars available for the growth and development of the State and its citizens.

As such, ending hunger means seeing hunger as a root cause to many of society's problems and developing policies in which ending hunger is the keystone:



. Ending hunger should be a keystone in our health policy - the link between nutrition and health is well established. Better nutrition leads to better health and lower health care costs.



. Ending hunger should be a keystone in our education policy - the link between nutrition and learning is well established. School nutrition programs should be considered as public health intervention as well as fundamental to learning.



Ending hunger should be a keystone in our agricultural policy - the link between lower income at risk consumers and our food producers is essential to expanding local food consumption and to improving diets.



Ending hunger should be a keystone in our economic policy - the link between nutrition and worker productivity (better health, fewer illnesses, fewer absences, mental alertness, fewer work related injuries) is well established.



Ending hunger should be a keystone in our taxation policy – reducing the tax burden on households in lower income brackets puts money directly in the pockets of people who need it the most and who will spend it immediately. Reducing the tax burden on smaller businesses and providing more incentives to help offset services to workers they cannot afford on their own will lead to greater economic vitality and to improved wages and benefits for workers.



Ending hunger should be a keystone in our environmental and land use policies – the loss of nutritional value of food during shipping and storage is avoidable. Diets can be improved by eating locally produced food. Only a small amount of the food consumed in Maine is produced on Maine farms. Yet Maine has the capacity to supply a substantial portion of the food needed to feed its residents. Better utilization of this capacity would lead to improved diets and better health while at the same time ensuring economic viability of Maine farms, preserving farmland, and strengthening the economy of rural Maine. Maine's land use policies should ensure farmland is protected from development, encourage direct producer to consumer markets, and improve access to local food.



Ending hunger should be a keystone in our transportation policies. Geography is the greatest challenge to linking producers and consumers. Maine is a vast rural state with little public transportation. For much of Maine, traditional approaches to providing mass transportation will never be cost efficient. Yet Maine has a growing population of elderly citizens and has adopted a public policy of assisting the elderly to remain in their own homes as long as possible, usually long after their ability to drive or their capacity to maintain their own vehicle has been lost. For younger generations, the difficulty finding reliable transportation and the high cost of owning and maintaining a vehicle upon which they can depend for holding a job limit their capacity to earn an adequate income. Maine must explore creative systems for ensuring reliable transportation for all who need it and we must ensure that those who can no longer drive themselves are not forced into a life of dependency, isolation, and deprivation.

IV. Commission's Blueprint for Ending Hunger in Maine

An end to hunger in Maine can be achieved by setting bold targets and working diligently toward their accomplishment. It will not be achieved simply by spending more, by creating more food pantries, or by increasing services to those at risk, though such approaches may be necessary in the short term.

Rather, an end to hunger will be achieved by making strategic and fundamental changes in public policy that affect the disposable income of families and the access of citizens to basic services that enable them to improve their lives, that increase access to locally grown foods, that ensure the dignity and well being of all Maine citizens, and that address changing demographic, social, technological and lifestyle trends.

Though food is the single factor central to ending hunger, hunger is much more than a food issue. The recommendations placed forward in this report reflect the breadth of policies and actions that have a role and a contribution to make to ending hunger in Maine.

The Commission believes that ending hunger in Maine requires five critical steps:

1. A firm resolve to end hunger in Maine that is reflected in public policy and action,
2. An economy that ensures the economic security of Maine citizens,
3. A food policy that recognizes the link between food production and distribution systems and resources, and access to locally produced food and that takes significant steps to increase the consumption of Maine grown food,
4. Major updating and restructuring of many current services and programs to respond to a changing world, and
5. A guarantee of dignity to all citizens and an accessible and seamless system of services to those in need.

1. *Maine's Resolve to End Hunger.*

State government and the public policies established by government have a major role in how the problem of hunger is approached and addressed and how the State moves forward to end hunger within its borders. There is overwhelming evidence that the cost of treating the effects of hunger is great and weighs heavily on the cost of government services. The benefits of ending hunger are “priceless”. If we are to make lasting change, Maine must resolve to make a significant paradigm shift in its approach to hunger and in the public policies that contribute to hunger in the State.

The problem of hunger in Maine must be made central to public policy debates and decisions. We must understand and approach hunger as much more than a social problem or a manifestation of poverty and acknowledge its far-reaching implications for many other aspects of the quality of life in Maine.



Immediate Legislative Actions

1. Establish a State policy to end hunger in Maine.

The Maine Legislature should state clearly its resolve to end hunger in Maine and ensure Maine moves steadfastly toward achieving an end to hunger by requiring that all future legislation, governmental policies, and public actions meet the criteria or test of leading to an end to hunger.

2. Revise and adopt an active and updated Maine Food Policy that reflects food security needs and moves the State toward greater food self-reliance.

In 1984 the Maine Legislature enacted A Food Policy for Maine. The policy is a comprehensive document that provides a blueprint for sustaining and strengthening Maine's agricultural industry, improving the level of nutrition and health of Maine residents, and for ensuring the many components of Maine's food system from producer to consumer are coordinated and integrated.

Because of the importance of a strong bond between Maine's food production capacity and the level of food security and quality of nutrition of its citizens, the Commission believes it essential to update and revitalize this important document. The Commission is especially concerned that Maine's Food Policy include a food security component and contain guidance and mechanisms for implementation and for periodic measurement of results.